

INTERVIEW XXX

DATE: November 4, 1987

INTERVIEWEE: LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. O'Brien's office, New York City

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G: One point on something we discussed yesterday: your continuing as national chairman. McGovern in his book maintains or takes the position that it was you who changed your mind, at first didn't want it and then did want it, and that was his explanation of his own change of position on the deal. What can you tell me about that?

O: The fact, as I describe it, is underscored by his repeated reference to his wife. Eleanor's feeling was that he had made a misjudgment. In his discussion with me in my apartment that evening, he described his wife's disturbance with him. The fact is that, though I wasn't present during their discussions, his wife was supportive of his view that I continue and of his pleasure that I would continue through the election. That view was not shared by the others. It's a minor point.

Clearly, I would have stayed through the election if that last phase of the discussion hadn't occurred when he returned, said he had a problem and he had committed to recognizing a woman in that role. Jean Westwood, as I recall it, was in the room with him. She was an ardent, long-time McGovern supporter. The view of his advisers prevailed, and he couldn't cope with it. When he returned, he broached the idea that Westwood and I be co-chairmen, which was a ridiculous suggestion. I think he realized it. It was dismissed out of hand. It made no sense.

You have to assume that following Miami this was a matter of continuing concern. That was manifested by his request to come to my apartment late that evening. Then he had another approach. I said to him I would not respond affirmatively that night and I had serious questions about it. He was departing the following morning to tour the Black Hills and he would be out of touch for a few days. He planned to return for a scheduled vote in the Senate. Could we come to a conclusion on this and work it out? If we could, immediately upon his return he wanted to publicize it. It did result, as I've recounted, in this press conference. I think he felt relieved. I have no idea about the reaction of the advisers who had been negative at Miami. But George McGovern was perhaps pressured by his wife, Eleanor, to resolve this and had something to do with his intense effort to bring this about.

In any event, it came about and, of course, Tom Eagleton was pleased. He had been disturbed with what occurred in Miami, which was unknown to him until the incident was over. He had contacted me from his hotel to express his concern. He recognized that

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as George's vice presidential running mate, he did not have any right to be involved in making a determination. It's conceivable, I suppose, that he might have had some input in this national chairmanship of the campaign. In any event, there was the matter of formalizing this decision. It meant you were to take space in the McGovern headquarters, that you would bring aboard key members of your staff and that was the case. It was a matter of clearing the air, but the implementation in terms of the structure of the campaign was never discussed in any detail. I was left, when I arrived at the headquarters, to pursue my own course.

As I mentioned, Gary Hart had a lengthy conversation with me and made it clear he totally understood. Obviously, if this campaign was going anywhere the party regulars would have to be participants. Gary Hart was a student of the Kennedy era and the Kennedy campaign in 1960. He was well aware of the need to broaden the McGovern base. He, at that session, detailed his frustration. He emphasized that the organizational concept of the Kennedy drive was to immediately seek out all elements of the party. Two things happened: one, Lyndon Johnson as the vice presidential nominee added an immediate dimension in the Kennedy campaign, and two, the regional meetings throughout the country, with which he was familiar, had been an initial effort to broaden the base. He said, "Now, we're faced with the same basic problem, but I am already frustrated because the regional people we've named are almost exclusively McGovern loyalists who have never participated in a national election campaign. They are wedded to George McGovern, dedicated to him. They have no basic interest in the Democratic Party as such. They consider it solely a vehicle to work within and they're in no position, if they had the will, to extend themselves beyond the McGovern base." He assumed my participation could have some impact in bringing in the party regulars. The result was that I focused on that.

The people involved with me, in their evaluation of the McGovern campaign, were highly critical. This was confidential to me. They pointed out that Gary Hart was continuing in the role he had, which was good; that Frank Mankiewicz apparently had carved out a role of traveling with McGovern through the campaign. He would be at his shoulder and his key adviser. There was no perceivable coordination in the offing to ensure there was a good mix and a maximizing of what potential there was.

I was urged by my people, as I had been designated national chairman, to place the elements of the campaign that did exist under my direction. There was another aspect by that time. Jean Westwood was in place as chairman, and there was no indication of any coordination between the McGovern campaign and the national committee. Jean Westwood and her people were carrying on in a rather independent manner. She and her people were dedicated to McGovern, there was no question about that. But this was a significant element of any presidential campaign, the role of the national committee. We had taken care in any campaign I had been in to ensure that the national committee was melded into the overall national campaign even to the point in 1968 of having the Democratic National Committee the center of the campaign, as I was campaign chairman and also national committee chairman.

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G: Is it normally intertwined with the campaign at the state level through the various national committee representatives?

O: No, that would be dependent on the individual members of the committee. The national committee in my years of involvement was to a great extent a mixed bag. There were members of the national committee who were members solely because of past activities or had been designated by a governor or a senator or both as a national committee member, men and women. There were a number of them who were not apt to be active. There were some who did, but it varied.

In any event, I was reluctant, and that was a mistake on my part, to say to the Mankiewiczels, the Henry Kimelmans, that everything flowed through me. I didn't feel comfortable with it, and I didn't do it. That meant I was not performing effectively, for which I should have been faulted. And I faulted myself. The fact was that I decided I had a pleasant relationship with Hart. I didn't involve myself in fund-raising, so that was not troublesome. I had to conclude that Jean Westwood was going to go her own way. So I decided to concentrate on labor and party regulars. This would be informally coordinated with Gary Hart. He and I had daily communication. We were in nearby offices.

We tried to pursue having organized labor active in the campaign. That posed a problem from the outset because of George Meany's attitude toward McGovern. You did not have at the top of the AFL-CIO vigorous movement in behalf of the ticket. That meant you had to deal with individual international union presidents and through that means develop an organized labor interest. George Meany was not going to object to that. He more or less washed his hands of the whole thing. He had no concern about the members of the AFL-CIO being as active as they cared to be, but he did not have the enthusiasm to lead this effort. So we put together a committee of labor leaders on our own, including Joe Beirne, head of the communication workers; John Keenan of the electrical workers, Floyd "Red" Smith of the machinists and Jerry Wurf of the federal, state, county and municipal employees. These were people widely as liberal labor leaders. They then proceeded to line up the support of key officers of forty-two international unions. That represented a majority of the union membership. Then in August "Red" Smith and Leonard Woodcock of the UAW arranged a joint session of their unions' top people. That was, incidentally, the first time there had been a formal joint session between the AFL-CIO and the UAW.

I was invited to speak to the joint session. It was heartwarming. These fellows were enthusiastic and were willing to put their resources on the line. You had to devote a lot of time and effort to finding, first of all, four, five or six top union leaders, presidents of international unions and then go to Leonard Woodcock to try to meld their efforts with the AFL-CIO. That meeting discarded the polls which were horrible and did not express concern about George Meany's inactivity. They proceeded from that meeting to do the best they could. You had key representation of forty-two international unions in one room. They were going to wage a major effort.

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The end result was probably predictable. These leaders were unable to persuade their membership to become involved. It became apparent they were faced with a widespread rank-and-file revolt. To sum it up, they found that their membership generally was hell-bent to get to the polls and vote for Richard Nixon.

G: Had Nixon's campaign encouraged this support?

O: There were committees of labor for Nixon as there were John Connally Democrats for Nixon. It came to him rather than he seeking it out. We weren't faring any better with the party structure. I made hundreds of personal contacts, hour by hour, day in and day out, twelve, fourteen hours a day contacting party people across this country.

I felt I should lean on the Congress, despite the knowledge that there was discontent among Democrats in the Congress. Party reform had caused a negative reaction among elected officeholders, which became personalized because under the guidelines of the McGovern commission they could no longer be designated delegates. They had to seek the position. Many of them had decided to refrain from that. They were turned off and it was comparable to what we were experiencing in labor. So I made an effort to bring together a group of Democratic congressmen and senators, and forty or fifty of them agreed to join me at a meeting to discuss this. They came to my apartment and we decided to let our hair down.

G: How were they selected?

O: Whoever we could get was what it finally came to. We made individual contacts by telephone and tried to get a representative cross-section of the Democrats in the Congress.

At the outset of the meeting the climate was reasonably good. Several said they were pleased an effort was being made and their advice was being solicited. But, as a group, they expressed great frustrations. It's easy to express frustrations if you have no real interest in being involved. What struck me at that meeting was that the handful of those present who really were McGovern supporters were the most critical of the campaign.

Abe Ribicoff was probably the most highly visible party regular in the country in support of McGovern. He dwelled at some length on his frustrations and the lack of coordination with him and with other senators. Abe mentioned McGovern's public comments on welfare were faulty. He objected to them and worse than that, he, an expert in the field, had not been consulted. If anyone could have helped McGovern carve out the right path in that area it was Abe Ribicoff. I was taken aback because my approach was that a handful of congressmen and senators who are McGovern supporters would join me in an enthusiastic presentation. I find the most vocal critics as the meeting unfolded are the very people who should be supportive. I'm not suggesting their criticism wasn't valid. For example, Adlai Stevenson strongly objected to McGovern's position on amnesty and

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he stated unequivocally he couldn't support that position in Illinois. Warren Magnuson, in his inimitable style when someone suggested we need more research on the issues said, "We don't need any more research on issues. What we need is a campaign." While my meeting has not erupted in total disarray, positive utterances seemed to be absent. On the House side, Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, [John] McFall, and [Hale] Boggs and others chimed in saying the same things.

G: What was the conclusion of the meeting?

O: We got to formal speeches. I had a high regard for Gary Hart, so I called Gary, who was present. He outlined the campaign as he saw it, the need for broadening support and the hope that those present would enthusiastically join in. That settled things down. They were receptive to Gary and receptive to the comments I made. What transpired from the meeting was that those present agreed to name one of their close advisers or staff members as a coordinator in the campaign and that there would be an involvement of their office and their facilities through this coordinator. The meeting, therefore, turned out worthwhile.

While there were coordinators who became available to us, the reality was that enthusiasm didn't seem to be forthcoming. What you had was a campaign that was as predictable as the convention in Miami. But, if I'm going to spend any time how could I most effectively utilize my time and what effort could I undertake?

Part of what was agreed to was, through these coordinators, we would develop statements and speeches and position papers that could be utilized by the members of Congress in their back-home activities. This would be coordinated through John Stewart who had joined me and had been on my staff at the national committee. Also, there was discussion of direct involvement of the congressmen and senators in the campaign.

The meeting was in three parts. It was a lengthy meeting, as I recall it. One was a bitch session, a complaint session. Part two was a formal presentation of the campaign structure and finally, a determination to institute specific activities, the assignment of people on their staffs, the development of statements and speeches and the agreement these members would make a special effort to promote the McGovern candidacy in their states and districts. For the life of me, I couldn't think of what else to do because I had never been in such a role in my life. Realistically, this candidacy of George McGovern was doomed to failure and these practical politicians were not going to break their pick. They were going to do some things. There would be a modest effort to be helpful. They are Democrats and this is the Democratic ticket.

Then the concern about internal coordination to which I referred. The evaluation made by my own people after our first days on the scene raised the question of my responsibility to surface what was a lack of coordination.

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O: That was a sensitive area because the more I would surface the more I could be accused of attempting to take over. Yet I couldn't live with the disarray. So we tried to bring the group together with the candidate at his home, including Jean Westwood.

I was always reluctant to take the candidate's time, as I was always reluctant to take a president's time unnecessarily. But I felt I was just not in a position to ensure some kind of coordination on my own. It might cause problems internally, which I certainly did not want to see happen. But we did get together. The meeting was held at McGovern's home and this was in late August, August 30, I guess. Gary Hart, Frank Mankiewicz and Jean Westwood were present and there were others, not a large group. The purpose, as I saw it, was to come out of that meeting with a coordinated effort for the remainder of the campaign. Now this is August 30.

Jean Westwood arrived with a bulging briefcase of material. It's George's meeting even though I have been the initiator. I look to him for leadership. In short order it bogged down totally. Jean Westwood took the lead role and proceeded, in detail and at great length, to describe a voter registration drive in a single area of New York State. To my dismay, George McGovern allowed this to go on and on. I became very distressed because there was no purpose whatsoever in subjecting the presidential candidate to this sort of nitty-gritty. So I finally spoke out. I said I had never seen a presidential candidate concerning himself with the details of a local voter registration drive. I told George bluntly, "You can't be an effective candidate this way. It interferes with your activities." Well, it kind of threw a cold shower on things. I assume that perhaps Jean considered that a personal affront. I had no concern about Jean personally, but I couldn't tolerate such a waste of precious time. I must say the meeting was nonproductive. There were other comments made here and there. George made some comments, but we closed out a lengthy session that as far as I was concerned had accomplished nothing. So you were destined to pursue the course you had been following.

You always seek under those circumstances, I guess, a little humor and there were side bars from time to time. That night I was able to make a point before we closed out. To my dismay when I joined the campaign, I found there was no mention in any material or headquarters signs of the word Democrat. Whether it had been ignored or there was some concept that if you avoided reference to the Democratic Party it would be a plus factor in the campaign, I don't know. The people involved were not looking at this campaign as a party effort, as Gary Hart had said about some of his coordinators. He mentioned in one session that just that day he had had a problem with a coordinator who had acted in a ridiculous manner involving party regulars and had caused animosities. These coordinators had the time, the commitment, the dedication to George McGovern, but didn't have the perception or experience to carry out their role effectively.

I had the temerity at that meeting to tell George that the only place I had seen the word Democrat so far in the campaign was in the literature of John Connally's Democrats for Nixon, and that "You, George, in addition to being the nominee of the party, are

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supposedly the head of the Democratic Party and reservations about so stating are troublesome." George's reaction was interesting. It was clear that this had escaped him. He recognized he hadn't been proclaiming himself as a Democrat, that he wasn't reflecting on the Democrats of the past--the Roosevelts and the Trumans and Kennedys--that he was sort of an independent candidate for president. It was not what he wanted or intended; it was inadvertence, and he reacted accordingly. He said, "Larry, you couldn't be more right." This is sad when on August 30 you're sitting in the man's home and he's saying, "You're right. We are Democrats."

G: But did he in fact give the party a larger billing in his campaign as a result of it?

O: He certainly committed to a larger billing that night. The remainder of the evening was devoted to discussing party loyalties and everyone committing, particularly the candidate, to emphasizing the party from that moment on. We were engaged in an effort to enlist the active support of party people across this country. The meeting closed out on this note--we're one party and I'm the nominee. The party and its accomplishments have to be referred to. With that we went home. I can't document how far we went in that regard, except within the headquarters through John Stewart's monitoring we were able to ensure we had a more normal party situation, whether it was press releases or statements that were issued. There was reference to the Democratic Party. That in terms of that campaign was a relatively minor matter. I am sure those around me were more sensitive to that than people generally. I'm not suggesting that, in that meeting of members of Congress, there was any expression of dismay, disturbance or wonderment about party loyalty on the part of the candidate or his people. So I'm not suggesting that had become a matter of general concern.

You weren't dealing, as I had been accustomed to, with people who had commitment to the party. This was a one-time thing. Therefore, I think my tendency perhaps was to exaggerate the situation because it disturbed me personally. In any event, as I became concerned about Jean's lengthy presentation of a local registration drive, it probably led me to be more vociferous and direct than perhaps I intended to be. I had no regret about what I said, and George McGovern took it in good spirits and responded affirmatively.

G: Did you ever get to the point where you threatened to leave the campaign unless--?

O: There were press stories--I don't know whether they were stories or a story. But there came at some point--

G: September sometime.

O: Yes. There was a story in a Chicago newspaper. I knew the writer well. We had had a conversation and at no time did I indicate I was leaving the campaign. I tried to put the best face on things. He had some strong views of his own and suggested I must be awfully frustrated. When the article appeared, it had no quote from me but it caused an

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uproar.

G: Did it? How so?

O: My best recollection is George McGovern immediately jumped into this. George talked to me by phone expressing concern. If there was something troubling me he'd correct it immediately. I did the best I could to paper it over.

G: Let's see. I think that there's a *Chicago Tribune* article on August 10.

O: Oh, it's that early.

G: Then the *Washington Post* September 2 has a piece saying that O'Brien had hinted two days ago that he might quit unless the campaign direction was improved.

O: That's as close as they could have come to "I'm going to resign," that "he hinted to someone." The fact is that was not in the cards no matter how frustrated I became. I had made a commitment; I would adhere to that commitment. In good conscience you wouldn't do otherwise and you would avoid any suggestion you would leave a sinking ship. Whether you were unhappy, distressed, dismayed, frustrated or whatever, that commitment, formalized at that press conference with McGovern and Eagleton, was a commitment through election day. McGovern reacted by immediately contacting me to say, "Gosh, let's sit down before you do anything." We resolved it by my reassuring him that there wasn't any need to have a discussion.

G: The accounts at the time indicate that at first there was resentment among the McGovern staffers when you joined the campaign.

O: There probably was, although I can't cite any direct evidence. I think you'd have to assume that. There had been opposition to me at Miami and there was no reason to believe that wasn't continuing. When McGovern decided to publicize widely my designation as the national campaign chairman, if there were continuing resentments they would surface. If I were Frank Mankiewicz and Gary Hart, who have devoted a couple of years to the candidate, and a fellow at this period in the campaign is crowned national chairman, I think that could be bothersome. Whatever resentments may have existed, they did not surface. Whatever disarray there was in the campaign that was troublesome to me was due to ineffectiveness.

Gary Hart not only did not express resentments but went out of his way to ensure an appropriate relationship with me. And I responded in kind. Gary was really the fellow with whom I had direct association. My contact with Frank Mankiewicz was limited. He was on the road with McGovern. I cited a meeting in McGovern's home. There was at least one subsequent meeting at McGovern's home and there were rare occasions when Mankiewicz would appear at headquarters.

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I had made fleeting reference to it and I think it's worth underscoring. The highlight of the campaign was the fund-raising. It was most impressive. I had not been involved in a campaign with such grass-roots response. Literally thousands of letters poured into headquarters. All of them contained modest contributions. Also, there were the fund-raising efforts conducted under the guidance of Kimelman. That would be the large donor, the Democratic liberal side. The interesting aspect of the campaign was there was not that nagging, overriding problem I had faced in 1968 of underfinancing. And that gets to the most expensive aspect--media.

The media side became a troublesome matter that again was evidence of lack of coordination. I enlisted Tony Schwartz to take a look at our campaign. Tony is most expert in creating TV spots. Charlie Guggenheim was handling McGovern's television. I don't recall any particular input I had, other than recognizing what was being utilized was pretty bland. I was groping for a breakthrough. The polls were reflecting we were getting nowhere. The time had come to gamble. I had been through that in the past. So I asked Tony to create some five spots and he did. One or two were not usable, but that's what you preferred Tony to do, extend himself, and then you make the judgments.

G: The Watergate spot, was that useful?

O: I don't recall any enthusiasm for a hard-hitting concept.

G: There was a corruption spot, too, I understand, or was this part of the Watergate spot?

O: It was a heavy spot. You might as well shoot the works. There's no point in waiting for the Gallup Poll to close. I injected myself into the media side of the campaign. I suggested we develop a hard-hitting half-hour. Of course, we had made demands that there be debates. The last thing in the world that Richard Nixon was going to do was engage in a debate with George McGovern. We tried to publicize his negative attitude on debates for whatever mileage you might get. I recalled what had been a very productive half-hour in the 1970s. I knew it was productive because of the reaction of the opposition to the half-hour at that time. Let's have McGovern debate Nixon using Nixon film, spots. The film clips would present the Nixon side of issues and McGovern would present his side. George McGovern initially rejected that approach. I did stress to George, "This is not going to be mean and vicious. It's going to be eminently fair." Off that, George gave the okay to proceed and we did proceed. We located the appropriate film. Charlie Guggenheim was enthusiastically involved. He finally had the rough cut. We met, the candidate and three or four of us, to view the result. We were completely taken aback. The end result, as George McGovern said, was a debate that Nixon won. That was the end of that project.

G: I want to raise one other question about the issue of resentment among the other veteran McGovern campaign leaders. There was one note in the press that indicated that some of these displaced or offended campaign organizers had planted a press story that you were there merely as a figurehead and that McGovern reacted with hostility to that action. Do

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you recall that?

O: That was another occasion when McGovern reacted strongly and quickly. He again contacted me, expressed his dismay and assured me the culprits were going to be removed from the campaign. George, I guess, assumed that I was upset. I assured him that I wasn't upset and there was no need to determine the culprits. It was another indication that George was uneasy throughout and hopeful I would be happy in my role. The overreacting of George in the instance I referred to earlier and in this instance indicated the degree of his concern.

G: Did you ever feel that you were just there as a figurehead?

O: No, I wasn't there as a figurehead at all. I can't tell you what would have occurred if I had aggressively taken over the full role of chairman of the campaign. George in his remarks at that press conference spelled it out in considerable detail. No one could have concluded at the end of that press conference that I was to be other than the chairman of the campaign. The follow-through, I guess, was up to me. The mandate was clear and I did not follow through. If I had, perhaps this disturbance, to whatever extent it existed among the troops, would have surfaced. I don't know, but the fact is that I didn't test it, because I didn't feel comfortable. I tried to carve out a role where I felt I could have some impact. That was with labor and the regulars. I would say the campaign manager was Gary Hart, basically. There was no conflict between Hart and me. Without question, I was frustrated throughout but not because of any perceivable effort to undermine me. In fairness to the McGovern people, it never occurred.

My frustration went to my inability to arouse the troops in labor and the party structure. That was extremely frustrating because, to the end of the campaign, the negative attitude toward McGovern's candidacy remained despite the effort of a number of labor people, and, indeed, a goodly number of elected officials who didn't hide and who I'm sure experienced the same frustrations I did. Throughout this, you're seeking some sort of a breakthrough.

G: Let's go into some of the issues and statements that the candidate made. First, let me ask one other thing about your taking on the role of national campaign chairman. I have a note that indicates that, as part of his effort to persuade you to take the position, he had held out the prospect of virtually any job in the government in a McGovern administration. Was this the--?

O: He might have. I don't recall that subject ever coming up and I don't believe it did. If it did I would have chuckled.

G: Did Frank Thompson become disenchanted with the organization and his--?

O: He did. Frank had a great track record in the organizational side of campaigns. He had been involved with us in 1960. Frank threw up his hands. He couldn't be bothered any

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longer.

G: The issues fellow, I guess, was Ted Van Dyke.

O: That's right.

G: The accounts seem to stress a disconnection between Van Dyke and the candidate on the road. Apparently a tendency not to think out an issue or response, to simply--

O: Yes. Ted Van Dyke played an important role in the Humphrey campaign. Ted was a creative fellow and a realist. I've never had any in-depth discussions with Van Dyke as to his experiences on the road. The role of Frank Mankiewicz was significant and Ted could have found it wasn't an easy path for him. My recollection is disenchantment there. Ted Van Dyke is a very able fellow and you had no difficulty determining Ted's views. He was outspoken in that regard. He devoted a great deal of time and effort to whatever he was assigned to. He was a significant plus in the Humphrey campaign.

G: Was it difficult on the issue of Vietnam to pursue a path that advocated a negotiated settlement quickly and yet at the same time not give the appearance of undermining the present foreign policy of the country?

O: It was difficult.

G: How did you straddle that?

O: I don't know as it was straddled. The difficulty was compounded by the candidate.

G: Tell me about the [Pierre] Salinger trip to Paris.

O: I'm not familiar with it.

G: Really?

O: No.

G: He met with representatives of Hanoi and then apparently there was a confusion in McGovern statements with regard to what had taken place at whose authorization. You don't remember these?

O: I recall a general state of confusion. Each element of this campaign you introduce into discussion provides further evidence of the disarray. What Pierre's designated role was and what supposedly would result from it I was never privy to.

G: Any other aspects on Vietnam?

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O: You had a campaign running very smoothly on the Republican side. Nixon had effectively blunted meaningful foreign policy debate.

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O: He and [Henry] Kissinger had progressed to the extent that we resorted to criticizing his lack of domestic progress, specifically complaining about his obvious actions to dismantle Democratic social programs. In order to emphasize that, McGovern made his own proposals which, as we have said, fell of their own weight.

(Interruption)

G: --put these proposals in a more favorable context. Did you make any effort to modify them in such a way that they would be better received by the electorate?

O: It was not my role following that election or today to Monday morning quarterback. McGovern probably acquitted himself as well as could be expected under the circumstances. I don't think it's fair to fault him personally. I think the McGovern drive was destined as the Barry Goldwater drive on the other end of the spectrum had been destined in 1964.

Now, that focuses, however, on one area that was most frustrating for me. That was the effort to spotlight Watergate during the campaign. My public statements represented an attempt on my part to bring Watergate to stage center, and that, too, was doomed to failure. I recall a meeting with McGovern prior to a press conference. This press conference was contemplated for some time. A lot of thought had been put into it. My emphasis was that Watergate be brought stage center by McGovern. Really focus on Watergate. We were in accord. We reached agreement that the candidate up front get into this aggressively, and not be dependent upon questions from the press, and it went forward that way.

I was not totally satisfied because of frustrations I had experienced back to Watergate in trying to spotlight this. McGovern did launch aggressive comments, which did elicit some low-key questions, not many but enough to keep the flame alive. He did a credible job of trying to sock it to them. What was the end result? The same as it had been. You could not get media to consider this a matter of serious proportions and that was to continue to be the case through the election and well beyond. If there was an issue potentially in that campaign that might have had some impact and have aroused public interest, it was that. But there's no way I can fault McGovern, because it never surfaced as a meaningful issue.

It was the climate of the time. Now knowing the actions taken by Nixon and his staff to cover up in the course of that campaign, the Nixon people rightly felt Watergate was behind them. They had succeeded in putting a cover on it. It's amazing that that could be the case. Nixon was able not only to be overwhelmingly re-elected, but survived

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as president for a considerable amount of time beyond that. But that's another subject.

The summary of that campaign is that we were destined. It never served, as far as I was concerned, any useful purpose to suggest that disarray to whatever extent it existed was a major contributing factor of the end result. The lack of hard-hitting media was a contributing factor. The attitude of the Democratic establishment, some elected officials and Democratic activists--disinterest and lack of enthusiasm--was a factor. It affected the vote count to some degree, but it did not affect the end result.

You had a significant factor that could not have been anticipated, the Tom Eagleton factor. I felt Tom Eagleton was an excellent choice by McGovern for his running mate and my view was generally shared. He was extremely well thought of. We all felt he would be an effective campaigner. He had a sufficient base of recognition to move quickly into the campaign. As part of the Nixon operation, of course, there was this exposure of his medical record. The press didn't seem to think how it became public was significant. You could condone breaking into hospital files and stealing a person's records. That was a minor aspect; the major aspect was the record. McGovern's initial gut reaction, which was totally understandable, was that he supported Tom a thousand per cent. That came back to haunt him. This was a sleazy political act on the part of the Nixon people. Be that as it may, it resulted in Tom's inevitable departure from the ticket.

G: Why was it inevitable?

O: It was too heavy a burden for Tom to carry and, most importantly, the nominee to carry. It would place him in a very defensive posture. You could anticipate a good deal of attention directed to this matter throughout the campaign. The inevitable aspect is that the VP nominee will come to the decision he must withdraw and the presidential candidate will come to the decision that it is in the best interests of his candidacy, though it is despicable on the part of the opposition. McGovern was faced with a major problem that could not be anticipated along with all the other problems he had.

G: But it was basically an issue not substance as far as McGovern was concerned, i.e., having a guy a heartbeat away from the presidency who had this history of--

O: Not at all.

G: That didn't bother him?

O: Not at all.

G: It was strictly from the standpoint of the press and the defensive posture.

O: The political fallout was the focus. I never heard from McGovern the slightest indication the medical record impacted on Tom's ability to perform a heartbeat from the presidency. It was a political decision.

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G: Should it have come into the equation?

O: I don't think so. I don't think it in any sense would have adversely impacted on him as a vice president, a heartbeat from the presidency. But McGovern had a major problem. He had the backlash from his initial comment and then the accusation of not being supportive of his running mate, a sign of weakness or worse. That was heavily played. Then he had the problem of replacement.

G: In retrospect, how best could the Eagleton affair have been handled having the benefit of hindsight?

O: The comment, "I support him a thousand per cent" created a problem you can't cope with. Is there a best way? Probably not. I think what it called for was silence at the outset, then quick communication between Eagleton and McGovern, resulting in a unilateral decision on the part of Eagleton promptly to do two things: decry what occurred and on the basis of what is best for the party and the candidate, withdraw but not in an apologetic manner. He could be strong in terms of decrying. But the decision would have been Eagleton solely. McGovern's response would be one of deep regret. If he had had his "druthers," he would not have accepted his resignation.

G: Did Eagleton show any interest in wanting to take this initiative or being willing to take this--?

O: I'm not aware of what occurred directly. The shock waves were there. With that scenario, you have no assurance you surmount this problem without negative fallout, obviously. There is simply no way. But beyond that, you were faced with a tremendous problem that had to be resolved quickly.

In the course of that, I found myself again in one-on-one dealings with George McGovern that involved me personally. He sought out Hubert Humphrey. Hubert Humphrey would decline without question. As you run through the party leadership, that would be an obvious first step or certainly an appropriate one. But as low key as possible, because it's not going to succeed. The next step was again quite obvious--to try to prevail upon Ed Muskie. Ed Muskie's decision took some time and this was unfortunate as it fanned the flames. Ed chose to fly to Maine to consider the request.

G: Someone commented that he might decide by election day.

O: That left George on tenterhooks. Could George, following Eagleton's departure, say, "Step one is to quickly contact Hubert; get his negative response, quickly contact Ed." While Hubert's response was assured, Ed's response was less so. The problem was the delay in response. George McGovern was trying to look beyond Hubert, beyond Ed Muskie and preparing for stage three. But you just take it one step at a time as quickly as you can. The delay on the part of Muskie certainly contributed to a further setback of the

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McGovern candidacy. Then if not Hubert and if not Ed, who?

Hubert would formalize his "no" and prior to Ed Muskie finalizing his "no," I received a request from George to have dinner with he and Eleanor, Elva and I, at the Jockey Club in Washington. It was rather strange. He was the candidate for president and a public restaurant where there was a lot of neck-craning was a little unsettling, but that was his preference. Of course, the subject was Eagleton's replacement. I found I was in a difficult position because George brought up Humphrey's name, Muskie's name and he might have mentioned others. Through dinner it was, "What is your judgment, Larry?" Not that he was going to accept my judgment; I don't want to give the wrong impression. It was just kicking it around.

It was either that evening or subsequently that McGovern made a comment to me that was surprising. He said, "You undoubtedly know, Larry, I seriously considered you at Miami." That was news to me. That would inhibit anyone who is being asked, "What do you think?" In any event, prior to Muskie turning it down, McGovern and I had a phone conversation initiated by him in which he said, "As you know, I'm waiting for Muskie's decision and if his decision is no, I'm going to be back to you immediately." Be back to me for what, for further discussion of the replacement or for discussion that would involve me directly? Thrust of the conversation would indicate the latter but there was no need for me to comment. The conversation terminated by, "Let's see what Muskie's decision is and I hope that he'll make it quickly." Muskie said no, and I did receive a prompt call from George McGovern in which he stated he wanted me to know he was seriously considering me to replace Eagleton. He did not state that was exclusively the case, nor did I construe it to be. Clearly, the chances were good that McGovern would be discussing this further with me.

I was left in a quandary. I was in my apartment. I took the call in the bedroom because I had guests in the living room. The guests included Dick Murphy and Stan Greigg. So when I hung up I called Elva who was in the living room with them to the bedroom and told her of the conversation. That put both of us in somewhat of a state of shock. While it might be a high honor to be considered for the ticket, it also posed some serious problems, far more serious than the problems I had faced with McGovern from Miami on. She and I concluded we would make no reference to this. There would be time to make a decision. Our feeling was that if this comes about, despite the high honor, I should decline for a number of reasons. Among those reasons was my lack of confidence in myself as a candidate in my ability to make a significant contribution to the campaign. Be that as it may, that wasn't a decision that had to be made then.

A couple of days went by and George McGovern calls. Meanwhile, there had been public comments, certainly not initiated by me. A couple of governors--including the Governor of Maryland--commented in support of me as the replacement for Eagleton. George said, "I want to update you on what has occurred. We"--which I assumed were his advisers--"have discussed this at great length and we have conducted a quick poll. I want to tell you that you fared extremely well." I'm a little taken aback that I would

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perform well in a poll, but I'll accept what he said. The poll had to be conducted in a twenty-four to forty-eight hour period. And he said, "I am very pleased with the poll results concerning you. However, there is a feeling you fared well in the poll in the political context, that you are identified as a politician and some of us"--or "the folks"--"suggest that under the circumstances it probably would not be a good idea to have a visible politician on the ticket. There's been discussion of Sarge Shriver." We've been discussing this and there is a feeling that perhaps Sarge would be the most appropriate replacement."

My response was, "I think it's an excellent idea. There's no question Sarge would be a vigorous, aggressive candidate that would carry on his end extremely well." I expressed a very favorable reaction to Sarge Shriver. Then he closed, "We haven't concluded this matter but I just wanted to update you." We closed on that note. I knew the decision had been made and I appreciated his courtesy in calling me. At no time had I remotely indicated any advocacy of Larry O'Brien nor had anyone else known to me. Undoubtedly, others had discussed me, unknown to me. My sense was one of relief. The fact is it was the better choice in my judgment under the circumstances at that time. That terminated that aspect and was an added element of my experience with George.

(Interruption)

O: As the result of the election indicates, this was a free ride for Richard Nixon. It obviously was not Nixon's nature to settle for a strong win. Watergate indicates he wanted to ensure victory beyond that. There wasn't, in the campaign, an undue amount of Nixon-type rhetoric or Nixon dirty tricks. That was taken care of in Watergate. There would be an occasional burst and McGovern was a pretty good target. It could be capsulized in a comment that I believe can be attributed to Senator Hugh Scott and repeated ad nauseum during the campaign. Scott said, "The McGovern campaign is the campaign of the three As: acid, abortion, and amnesty." That was particularly repugnant to me because the media played it to an inordinate degree while we were busily engaged in an attempt to surface Watergate and failed to do so.

G: How important was busing as an issue in this campaign?

O: Well, it was a sensitive issue. I don't recall it was overriding but the sensitivity to busing was there.

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G: But was there one of McGovern's positions that you feel cost his campaign more votes than anything else?

O: I think the commitment to spread the wealth, so to speak. It made an impact. It was widely reported and debated.

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(Interruption)

O: The candidate and all of us muddled our way through. We closed out the campaign and he returned to South Dakota for the election returns. It was a very early night obviously. There were no expectations and no excitement. It was deadly dull. I spent the night in the McGovern headquarters in Washington. Relatively early on I decided I would call McGovern. I had always had the experience of being with the candidate on election night with the exception of Lyndon Johnson's election in 1964. But even then we talked during the course of the evening on a number of occasions and kept abreast of things that way. There were no plans for the candidate's involvement election night that I was aware of, so I decided to initiate a call to the motel where he was staying. I offered the appropriate condolences and complimented him, rightly so, on his individual effort throughout. I couldn't think of anything that he could have done that would have changed the situation so he shouldn't have any regrets in that regard. He had campaigned tirelessly. He, in turn, thanked me for my efforts but he made a comment that was rather surprising to me. He said that he had truly felt in the last few days up to election that he could win. He felt that he had turned it around and had some degree of optimism regarding the end result. That optimism to my knowledge wasn't shared by any of us but perhaps it was the nature of the fellow.

The most memorable aspect of that conversation to me was that he brought up the Doral [Beach] Hotel and said that he always regretted and always would regret what occurred that day. Following that we terminated the conversation. I reflected on this aspect. I thought, "Here is a man who is in the midst of suffering a devastating defeat, who took the occasion to reflect on the Doral Hotel and the problems that he and I had regarding the chairmanship." That was surprising. He did bring it up again by way of apology. Apparently it made a lasting impact on him. That probably would account for the extent of his effort to ensure my continuing involvement in his campaign. On reflection, there were any number of steps he took to ensure that involvement. The fact is it was not essential to McGovern that I be involved in his campaign. Whatever reputation I might have could in no way account for the depth of his concern regarding my continuity. I've always felt that the role of somebody in an effort of this nature can be grossly exaggerated. There's no individual who is important enough or able enough or knowledgeable enough to make a significant impact on a presidential election other than the candidate. So perhaps in closing out my relationship with McGovern in that phone conversation, I had a better understanding of the man than I had heretofore.

But in defeat there's the aftermath in terms of the party structure and the role of the defeated candidate for president as titular head of the party. The role is a diminishing role, as reflected in Hubert Humphrey's effort after 1968 to designate his choice for chairman of the party when the party executive committee declined to go along. Clearly, the discontent that existed in the election indicated that McGovern was not going to have any leadership role in the party whether he desired to or not. That became eminently clear in his choice for chairman, Jean Westwood. She faced strong opposition. Jean had been chairman from the end of the convention in Miami to election night and her days were

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numbered. There was a meeting of the national committee scheduled about a month following the election. During that time there was intense campaigning and maneuvering to determine a successor to Jean Westwood. She had made it clear she would be most willing to continue as chairman.

That brought a number of candidates for the office. Chuck Manatt had been California Democratic chairman. He played a very active role in California party affairs and had a long-time desire to be national chairman. George Mitchell of Maine had been state chairman in Maine, extremely active in the party and a long-time associate of Ed Muskie. He, too, enjoyed a fine reputation across the board. And Bob Strauss, who had performed admirably under difficult circumstances as treasurer of the national committee, clearly had a keen desire to be chairman. There were others I'm sure who entertained the idea.

In that period I had conversations with George Mitchell and Chuck Manatt, who came to my apartment to visit on the subject of the chairmanship. Each stated he was going to seek the chairmanship, and I believe followed through. Bob talked to me on the phone a couple of times and made clear his interest.

Meanwhile, some of my long-time associates suggested perhaps I would consider seeking the chairmanship once again. It added up to nothing sensible or serious. I described to them my view. Yes, undoubtedly an element of the national committee would be interested in my candidacy.

However, my view was this would result in defeat of Bob Strauss because among those we were aware of would be people that otherwise would support Bob. That was something I would not engage in. Nor did I feel I should become involved in the contest for the chairmanship. It was far better to close the book. They had shared with me an extremely difficult period. None of us had at any time done anything but what we thought best on behalf of the candidate. We were life-long Democrats and would continue to be. There was no point in causing any disruption because the party was going to be in dire need of, again, reorganization. Beyond that, I thought well of Manatt and well of George Mitchell. They were two high-quality fellows. Also, I thought highly of Bob Strauss but when the chips were down, the man who had earned the right as I saw it was Bob Strauss. Bob had the capability of mounting a campaign and he had a lot of support. He had no assurance of victory, but he certainly was in the position to make a real contest out of it, as were Manatt and Mitchell. So we closed it on that basis. Bob, as it turned out, in a strongly contested situation was elected chairman by a very narrow margin. But he succeeded.

G: Were you there at the meeting?

O: No. He was entitled. During his period as chairman he performed well in the office.

So that's the way I closed out.

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End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview XXX

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Signed by Lawrence F. O'Brien on April 5, 1990.

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